

Buddhism - Our Role in the Pursuit of Peace in the World

A Historical Analysis

[A paper presented recently at a Unity of Faiths' Symposium in Adelaide, South Australia]

Bhikkhu Professor Dhamavihari

It is a great pleasure to be invited to participate in a symposium of this nature. The convenors have very clearly indicated that this get-together today is seriously meant to be a Unity of Faiths' Symposium. As Buddhists, we are very much at home with you in your bid. With a very much down to earth philosophy of man in harmonious and cordial relationship to man, at a very visible and conceivable level, we have never, never stood up against any single man or groups of men in the name of our faith, either to defend or propagate our religion. That is quite a record for a faith with a history of more than two and a half millennia. That was very much before the time of the appearance of most of today's great world religions. As the great Islamic historian Al Biruni records more than a thousand years ago, most countries in the region of Afghanistan and Iran, during the early centuries of the Christian era, were Buddhist in their beliefs. Historical circumstances like incursions and invasions have made things look different. For evidence of this, look with honesty in the direction of literary records and archaeological remains. Less than six months ago, the threats uttered by the Talebans in Afghanistan brought some of this evidence before the saner and sincere pursuants of peace in the world. Such evidence is always plentiful in the air. But most of us tend to believe that the less we talk about them the better. But I am not too sure.

Humans in This World / Their Rightful Place

Recognizing this relative antiquity of Buddhism, i.e. of its being more than twenty-five centuries old in its attitudes and approaches, and also of its being Asiatic or more specifically Indian in its origin, let me present to you a few of its salient features. I know we would all be happy to discover similarities. Similarities or dissimilarities, as far as we are concerned, these segments of religious teachings pertain to two major areas. They concern themselves with men and women who have come into being in the world, both at the same time but as two different sexes, each holding its own dignified position, each clearly different from the other, primarily for the perpetuation of the species. This, we maintain, is the major continuous process of creation in the world at all times, inspite of test-tube babies, and inspite of the much talked of and debated cloning and the very recent production of dolly and polly.

There is also closely associated with this, and in all systems of religious thinking, the question of the destiny of these humans, of both men and women, of their destiny beyond death. This pertains to a life beyond the present. More and more people today are getting convinced of the reality of this. It is also interesting to note that alongside this, the concept of life in the world is not going to remain confined to a mere flat earth down here. Speculation on extra-terrestrial life and acceptance of its reality is gradually gaining more and more respectable believers.

Buddhism accepts both these positions amidst its major axioms. It accepts that life, whether of humans or of animals is the outcome of a process of evolution and not of creation. The Indians had known and accepted it well before the time of the Buddha. Very similar to the Big Bang theory in the evolution of the universe, the Indians held a theory of an opening out and expanding universe. Life is believed to be part of this gradual process of coming into being. Hence the Buddha naturally rejected the idea of a creationist theory. And remember, that well over twenty-five centuries ago, well before today's peak of science and technology came on the scene. Following this, the Buddha also rejected the idea

of a controller of human destiny from outside the realm of humans. Let us peacefully agree among ourselves to disagree, if we had the need, on these ideas. But please forget not that this is the very vital anthropocentric approach of Buddhism. Buddhists have to continue to be Buddhists, with these vital ingredients within their thinking.

Man's Salvation in His Own Hands, With Love as Its Basis

Man, in the manner of his behaviour, works out his salvation or brings about his own damnation. Salvation in Buddhism is personal and individual. In the absence of an outside agency who assists or mediates in bringing about this salvation, the men and women of the world have to undertake a personal process of self-correction and self-perfection. For it is the incorrect process of living in the world which makes life stressful, unhappy and bitter. And we believe, for here and hereafter. Things of the world, inspite of their undetected, loosely integrated, rapidly changing nature, lure and entice us. We go chasing after them for our own gratification and are caught up in an endless series of conflicts and frustrations. We as Buddhists, look upon wish-fulfillment as only a gambler's dreamy process. When wishes are not fulfilled, these differed hopes make our hearts sick. This is where all human misery in the world begins. Wars, juvenile and adult sex crimes, frauds and thefts, assaults and murders, the newspapers are all full of them. They all have their genesis in this naturally aberrant human behaviour. To the Buddhists, this is the real Book of Genesis. We call this the Genesis of Unsatisfactoriness or in our own scriptural language Samudaya Sacca. We have very little interest in the physical origin of the universe.

The Buddhists therefore take up their religiousness with man's correction of himself, by himself. We begin with self-awareness of man about himself as the primary concern of religion. We cannot afford to leave it in the hands of another, outside of ourselves. Therefore our first injunction is that man shall love man as his first duty. It is in the absence of this that both greed and hatred, which Buddhism regards as the basic evils which mar human life to the core, germinate

and reach up to their luxuriant growth. We have a very simple word to imply the totality of this. It is the Sanskrit word *maitri* or *mettā* in the original language of Pali in which the Buddhist scriptures are preserved. Basically, this just means friendliness, absence of any hostility which may be surfaced or submerged. Universal loving kindness, we would say, is a derivative of this spirit of friendliness. It is the universal acceptance of friendship with everything that lives, man or animal. We develop these thoughts of loving friendliness, with no expectation of rewards or returns. *Maitri* has no mysterious links with anything unknown to man. As a quality, of both head and heart, it is self-evident like a mother's love to her child [*mātā yathā niyaṃ p uttam*]. Its impact is equally self-evident, we maintain. It blooms with an unmistakable fragrance. Its directness, without going via any intermediary substations, inspite of time space gaps, makes it universal.

The world is, space wise, admittedly vast. So is it time wise, infinitely extensive. Within it, there have appeared from time to time, diverse faiths, i.e. systems or blocks of religious beliefs which claim to guide and enrich the lives of people here and now, also with the specific purpose of rewarding them in a life beyond this. Thus relative to their time and space diversities in origin, they reflect multiple differences in approach and application. It is an incontestable fact in history that these differences have led to an unjustifiable sense of superiority and a claim to priority and precedence among these religious blocks. Factors like arrogance of old world colonialism, economic and military stature of new world power blocks, and even economic resourcefulness, have contributed very much to perpetuating these malformed and malignant social phenomena. Be that what it may, they have also contributed very much to the uneasiness in the world, east or west, north or south. But very fortunately for us, there is at the same time a rapidly growing awareness about this in the world today. That is why we are meeting in symposiums like this more and more. Why more and more theologians and serious students of religion show us new ways of questioning religious dogmas and more meaningfully re-reading older scriptures.

With Supremacist Arrogance / Never a Search for World Peace

Religions are pluralistic in origin and have to continue being so. Any attempt, for whatever reason, to bring them under one canopy, with this or that central belief, is therefore bound to be disastrous in consequence. Religions will have and can have diversity of approach and aspirations. They do not need to be reduced to a common denominator. The same will be with political ideologies: democracy versus communism or communism versus democracy. Is it any different with ethnic identities? Whether one speaks of natives or aborigines, whites or blacks or even Eurocentricism and Afrocentricism in current theological discussions.

Unity of faiths has to be a very clearly different concept. It must be the respectful recognition of the existence of other groups which are different from one's own. Along with religious faiths, this must also necessarily embrace the diversities of political and ethnic groupings everywhere in the world, whether it be in Bosnia, Sri Lanka or Rwanda. Personal identities and peaceful co-existence have to be equally valid concepts. Thinly veiled or more dexterously camouflaged, any group's claim for superiority over the other, or any one's attempt to make others believe that they alone have the answers to problems, have to be bravely challenged and equally bravely crushed and rejected, no matter whether they be religious, social or political.

So if we are really looking for peace on earth and goodwill among men, we must not fail to primarily make the adjustments from this end of the men on earth. We must show our readiness here for peace to those above, before we make our supplications. It is the men here who are answerable for all the misdeeds, whether they are boarder disputes or aboriginal rights, which make things difficult for men on earth. Social justice and human rights from the widest angles of the concept must be handled with honesty and sincerity. We must call upon the humans to behave themselves with such decency and not make the concept of the divine flee in shame. This is what we believe to be the human ascendance to transcendental divinity. It is this goodness of human behaviour brought about by

man himself alone which brings about this elevation, and not a mere belief in and a surrender to the greatness of the divine. This is the cold logic of Buddhist thinking.

Thus, religion wise, a kingdom of man on earth first appears to us to be the most feasible proposition. Love, or more specifically undivided love of all living things in whose midst we humans live, all eco-systems with their bio-diversity, as well as respectful recognition of our differences, religious, ethnic, political etc. are basic ingredients needed for such peaceful co-existence. While such intolerance reduces man to a despicably low level of existence, we stress that tolerance is not the best English word we should use here. It seems to imply an unjustifiable air of superiority from a higher to a lower. Such gradations are socially unacceptable in the world today. Respectful recognition and acceptance alone prevents the senseless and fanatic destruction of vast segments, including human life, of the world we live in. These are often undertaken with the approval of religious dogmas.

No amount of religious or political bargaining, with a great deal of shrewd cunning beneath it, will ever get us nearer to world peace. All such dealings have to be convincingly above board. Let us all jointly call for co-lateral love, respect and mutual recognition. That alone shall be the basis for unity of mankind. ' Let no one ever cheat another or consider oneself superior to the other. Or wish ill of another in one's anger or rage.' These are regular refrains from Buddhist thinking. Let there first be peace on earth and goodwill among men. Then alone will man be properly qualified to occupy a place in heaven above, wherever that be.

And finally, without surrendering any of our major tenets, we as Buddhists are confident that we can put in our tiny drop, both by way of thinking and acting, into what may be called a world think tank, if the world has any such at all today or think it should soon set up one, at least for the sake of better living in the twenty-first century.

Adelaide Sri Lanka Buddhist Vihara
13 Gardiner Avenue
St. Morris
SA. 5068